

SYLVIA SYMS

A Jazz Portrait of Johnny Mercer

Recorded
Live at Jack
Kleinsinger's
Highlights
in Jazz
November
1984
Previously
Unreleased



91433 • SYLVIA SYMS • A JAZZ PORTRAIT OF JOHNNY MERCER • DRG



1. RIDIN' ON THE MOON
2. SKYLARK
3. I THOUGHT ABOUT YOU
4. COME RAIN OR COME SHINE
5. SATIN DOLL
6. EARLY AUTUMN
7. HOORAY FOR HOLLYWOOD
8. FOOLS RUSH IN
9. A MEDLEY
10. MY SHINING HOUR

AL COHN • *Tenor Sax*

JOE NEWMAN • *Trumpet*

GENE BERTONCINI • *Guitar*

JAY LEONHART • *Bass*

RUSS KASSOFF • *Piano*

RONNIE BEDFORD • *Drums*

A A D TPT 69:04

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The concert took place on November 14, 1984, and there were 727 people packed into NYU's Loeb Student Center. However, like Bobby Thomson's pennant winning homerun in 1951, many many more claim to have been in attendance. In 22 years of producing Highlight's In Jazz, with over 170 concerts to date, this is undoubtedly the most fondly remembered program in the history of the series.

■ The concert was billed as A Jazz Portrait of Johnny Mercer and Sylvia Syms ordered me to "put the emphasis on the word 'jazz' and get me some players who can really wail.

Let the people be reminded that I'm not just a cabaret diva but a damn good jazz singer."

■ Sylvia's wish was the producer's command, so the call went out to jazz greats Al Cohn, saxophone, Joe Newman, trumpet, and Gene Bertoncini, guitar, along with a perfect rhythm section of Russ Kasso, piano, Jay Leonhart, bass, and Ronnie Bedford, drums.

■ To keep the music fresh and spontaneous, I had Sylvia rehearse with the rhythm section only. At the time Sylvia accused me of being too stingy to pay for a full rehearsal (she autographed a photo for me "To El Cheapo"), but later admitted that it made the concert more exciting. The musicians left out of the rehearsal had no idea what songs Sylvia was going to sing or when they would be called upon to solo. Sylvia in turn was thrilled by the supportive and inspired music being played behind her, and although she had been singing many of these songs in her nightclub act, the presence of the added musicians spurred her to even richer renditions of the Mercer gems. Highlights of the evening included Bertoncini's gorgeous work on "Fools Rush In," Al Cohn's heartfelt "Early Autumn," and Joe Newman's soulful "Satin Doll;" and Sylvia's interpretations of "Skylark," "I Thought About You," and "Come Rain Or Come Shine" may turn out to become the all time definitive versions of these classic standards.

■ Sylvia knew and loved Johnny Mercer. She treated his songs with reverence, affection, and great originality. Sometimes playful, sometimes sensual, at all times emotional. Her spoken remarks (unlike the "small talk" of most vocalists) were insightful, sensitive, warm, and articulate, and a perfect complement to her vocal artistry. Her closing medley climaxed by a deeply moving interpretation of "Blues In The Night" still sends chills up my spine. This was not a little girl in pigtails - but a battle-scarred woman singing her heart out.

■ Sylvia was a perfectionist, never totally satisfied with any of her albums, and second guessing even her finest performances. Here, on the opening selection she makes the band repeat the last 8 bars telling the audience, "I'm not going to have you thinking that lady is tone deaf." However, she was extremely happy with this concert.

■ People often say of recordings that it's the next best thing to being there in person, but this time it may be even better - because we can hear these performances over and over for the rest of our lives.

■ Shortly before she died, Sylvia made me promise to move heaven and earth to get this concert out on a CD so people could hear what she could do surrounded by great jazz musicians in front of a wildly enthusiastic audience.

■ I kept my promise, Sylvia.

JACK KLEINSINGER

Producer, Highlights In Jazz



In the gray, pre-dawn hours of a placid Sunday in the spring of 1992, I was awakened by the angry, urgent clatter of a ringing phone. It was Liza Minnelli, fighting tears, calling to tell me three devastating words that said it all: "We lost her." Sylvia Syms, whose big fat heart and velvety voice lifted the art of both life and song to new heights of excellence, had died the way she wanted – on stage, in an elegant room, singing love songs to a packed house at the Algonquin Hotel. "When I go," she had told me countless times, "I want to go in the middle of a standing ovation," and that's exactly what she did. Ironically, the woman who had been a friend, a supporter, a teacher to many and the mother of us all, died on Mother's Day.

■ She left behind a posthumous legacy of great music for new generations to discover, but what you will hear on this collection is of special historic value. It marks the first and only in-person recording of Sylvia Syms in concert, doing what years of training and experience taught her to do best, polishing her art in front of a live audience, surrounded by musicians she trusted and admired, singing the poetic lyrics of the great and versatile Johnny Mercer, a songwriter she worshipped and adored. Recorded at New York University eight years before her death, on the evening of November 14, 1984, it captures the passion, humor and concentrated musical quintessence of her artistry in ways no controlled studio performance could ever approximate. The uninitiated will hear the faultless phrasing and hip musical imagination of a legendary singer in the acme of her power, but for those of us who knew and loved her personally as well as professionally, it's like a visit with a cherished friend. The resulting entertainment value is highly restorative.

■ Wisely, every word, every note, every juicy ad-lib of that evening's Mercer celebration has been preserved intact, warts and all. The tireless quest for perfection that turned Sylvia into her own toughest critic and often made her a royal pain in the ass to everyone who loved her is evident from the opening number. "Ridin' On The Moon," a staple of her repertoire, was a warmup for the workout that followed, but something went awry with the Harold Arlen melody only a bird could hear. Repeating the modulation on the tag, Sylvia was determined to give her audience their money's worth. It's worth hearing twice, but I like it both ways.

■ The first time I heard her sing "Skylark" was at one of those celebrity-studded parties that could only happen in New York. It was Johnny Mercer's birthday, and one by one, the after-midnight icons of sophisticated music gathered around the Steinway to salute him—first Bobby Short, followed by Tommy Flanagan, Blossom Dearie, Margaret Whiting, Marian McPartland, Mabel Mercer, Bill Evans, and Barbara Carroll. Mel Tormé accompanied himself on an exquisite "This Time the Dream's on Me." Even the legendary Kay Thompson, in one of her rare forays into post-retirement bliss, was persuaded to knock out every chorus she arranged for Judy Garland's "On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe" at MGM, accompanied by the equally legendary Ralph Blane. Then it was "We Want Sylvia!", followed by her usual bullshit. She had no arrangement. She had no piano player. She had a sore throat. No way could she follow so much talent. Ignoring her protests, Johnny Mercer dragged the dumpling-shaped diva to the piano himself, and their collaborative rendition of "Skylark" was like being in church. That electrifying thrill is recreated here, with Sylvia phrasing the bridge behind the beat for added emphasis. Pure ambrosia.

■ No matter how many times you've heard "I Thought About You" and "Come Rain or Come Shine," you'll experience freshly minted subtexts in these poignant renditions. You will also hear the Cheshire cat grin on "Satin Doll" that gives a joyful lift to the familiar lyrics behind the swinging melody by Billy Strayhorn and the man Sylvia called Edward, the Duke of Ellington. This is the fat, sassy, almost Oriental grin that inspired Frank Sinatra to call her Buddah until the day she died.

■ Her tender reading of "Early Autumn," with Al Cohn recreating his original saxophone solo for the Woody Herman band, sounds like a duet for two horns. With Judy Garland, Sylvia shared a brassy sense of humor that saw her through her bleakest periods of adversity. That irreverent sense of mischief comes through like a crack of April sun on "Hooray For Hollywood". Moments later, she can break your heart, as Gene Bertoncini's gorgeous guitar clusters inspire her to new heights of ecstasy and wisdom on "Fools Rush In." Mercer wrote about 500 standards and had more hits than Irving Berlin, but in her nine-song medley of his career highlights, Sylvia distills the poetic essence of his humor, savvy and pathos. With the crowd slavishly screaming for more, it's only proper that she signs off with her signature song, rubbing a patina on "My Shining Hour" that remains unsurpassed.

■ These are the things you'll hear as you experience the thrill of a legend who has reached the top of her form. What you will not hear is the hell she went through, like Porgy, to get there. First, she listened. Then she lived. As a fat little Jewish girl from Brooklyn, she belted out the songs she heard on her radio under her sheets at night, after the house was asleep. At 17, she started sneaking out of the window after her folks went to bed, creeping



the subway with a dollar in her purse, and heading for the jazz joints on 52nd Street, where the doormen knew her and sneaked her in to watch Mildred Bailey and Art Tatum from the hatcheck room. Billie Holiday adopted her and one night, when she burned a hole in her hair with a hot comb, it was Sylvia who grabbed a gardenia from the cigarette girl, stuck it in Lady Day's hair, and started a trend. Count Basie let her sing with his band and said "That chick knows things they don't teach in no school." Duke Ellington teased her; "Baby, I don't know what you're gonna do with your life, but save a bone for me." She got wrinkles in her face and wrinkles in her soul by paying her dues.

■ I've never known anyone who loved to sing so much, or anyone who cared so little about what she had sung already. She cut her first records with Stan Kenton and Shelly Manne in 1948, but the masters burned in a fire. She made her first album in 1951 with Barbara Carroll playing an out-of-tune piano in the days before contracts, without residuals or even cabfare. She made at least a dozen albums that remain collector's items but she never owned any of them. What she craved was the sheer act of doing it. It was the work that kept her alive, whether it was an AIDS benefit in a Greenwich Village garage or a concert at Carnegie Hall. The magic of making lyrics come to life is what gave her wings.

■ In the process, she could become dogmatic, stubborn, relentlessly provocative. She could also be sloppily sentimental. An injured child or a wounded poodle could make her cry until her contact lenses fell into the street and we'd both be on our knees searching in the dark. She was reckless with money, giving it all away to needy friends and charities, and paying for everything with little wads of crumpled fifty-dollar bills that spilled constantly into

the seats of cabbies she addressed as "Driver, dear." She was a sucker for a fast touch from a homeless junkie, but she couldn't begin to balance a checkbook. She left several marriages, taking nothing but her girdle. She loved gossip and relished a good scandal, but remained liberal and non-judgmental about sex, saying "I don't care what anybody does in bed - I just wish they'd do it to me once in a while."

■ She was obsessively self-effacing about her voice ("If you want to know how I sing, baby, go home and tear up a rag") and her looks (I wish I had a nickel for every time I heard a message on my answering machine in the middle of the night announcing. It's Audrey Hepburn. Call me.") Paul Newman once told her that whenever she sang she turned into a very sexy broad and she never recovered. She carried that quote to her grave like an eight-pound emerald.

■ She had an insatiable curiosity about life, collecting people the way an entomologist collects butterflies. Her friends were gangsters, drag queens, politicians, millionaires and movie stars, and she treated them all alike. She knew everyone from Mae West to Willie Mays and I'm not kidding. Many times, during one of our 3 a.m rap sessions, she'd say "It's Lily Tomlin on the other line, I gotta take it". Or use secret codes for Sinatra like "It's the old man calling from Palm Springs, he needs advice." When she didn't like somebody, she could give the evil eye to earls and barons and dilettante vocalists who sang out of tune with a demonic possession that could, in the Salem days, have gotten her burned for witchcraft. She didn't suffer phonies or fools easily, her jokes were bawdy, her opinions about music were arrogant but always on target, her table manners could sometimes be appalling.

(She's the only person I've ever seen eat ice cream with her fingers.) And yet, despite the salty emotional directness that often sent timid souls fleeing for the doors marked "Exit", she treated her friends with gentleness, loyalty, affection, generosity, and infinite patience. When you're in trouble, the people you think you can count on often cannot be located with a spyglass. Sylvia was always there, and no questions asked. I've lost count of the times she saved me from drowning in my own seas of adversity, dragging me upstream with a breaststroke Esther Williams would have envied.

■ If I could add one word to any assessment of the Sylvia Syms I knew, it would not concern the color and vitality of her work, the creativity of her talent, or her unique approach to lyrics that prompted Rosemary Clooney to label her "The Godmother". The word would be courage. John F. Kennedy always said courage was grace under pressure and I've never known anyone with so much of it. Plagued by a lifetime of physical ailments, she endured them all with laughter that started like a cackle and built its way into a lusty, sandpaper roar. Her illnesses could fill a medical dictionary, but she was not a woman afflicted by despair or self-pity. The only time I knew her to beat the verbal hell out of one of her doctors was during a painful cobalt treatment that threatened to make her late for her next appointment. She was a champ who never went down for the count, who kept getting up after every blow, ignoring the bell. Even in sadness and pain, she could always make me laugh. That is why, when Jackie Cain sang a breathtaking "After You" at Sylvia's funeral, the line "I could search years, but who else could change my tears...into laughter...after you" reduced a standing-room-only mob to calves' foot jelly.

■ That is why time cannot diminish the impact her music and her friendship had on me. That is why I miss her achingly. And that is also why this concert version of the art of Sylvia Syms has special significance. Galvanized by the electricity of a live audience, without tricks or tracking, over-dubbing or synthesizers, she demonstrates what so many singers never learn – that all great singing, like all great art, comes from the heart. This one is for posterity. This one is for the archives. And it is more.

■ Syl, this one is for you.

REX REED



Rex Reed with Sylvia

JACK KLEINSINGER • *Concert Producer & Master of Ceremonies*

AL COHN • *Tenor Sax*

JOE NEWMAN • *Trumpet*

GENE BERTONCINI • *Guitar*

JAY LEONHART • *Bass*

RUSS KASSOFF • *Piano*

RONNIE BEDFORD • *Drums*

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DON WADE, COLLEGIUM SOUND • *Original Sound Engineer*

BOB STONE, BOBCO STUDIOS • *Sound Restoration & Digital Transfer*

CYNTHIA DANIELS • *Digital Mastering*

ERIC KOHLER • *Art Direction*

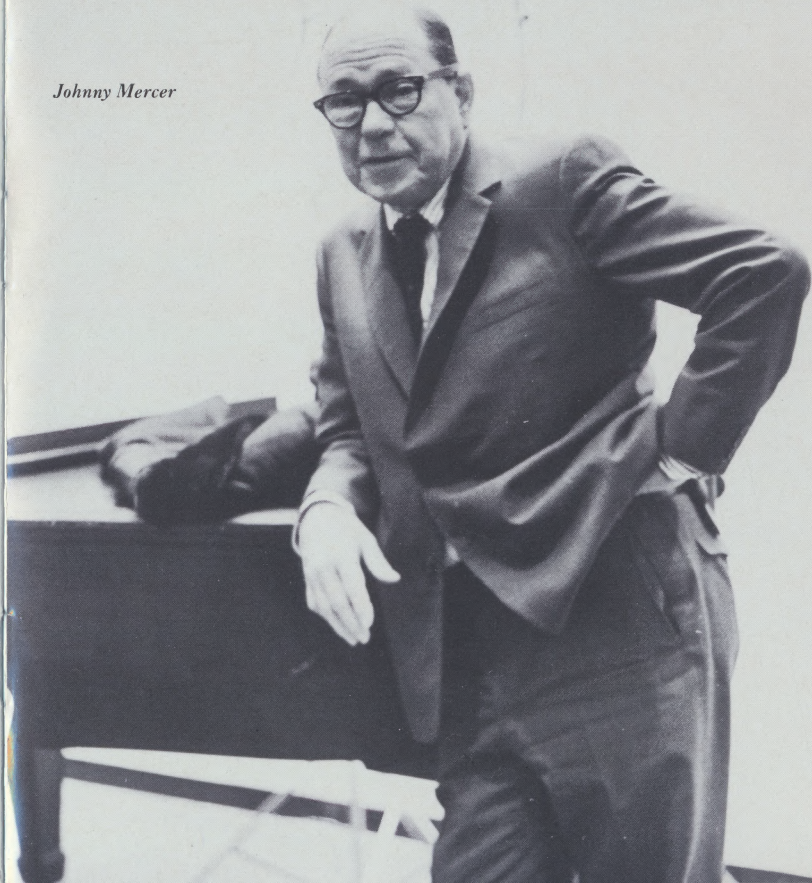
ERIC STEPHEN JACOBS • *Photography*

*Photograph of Johnny Mercer courtesy of Frank Military,
Warner / Chappell Music Inc.*

*Special thanks to Mr. and Mrs. Steven La Spina on behalf of the estate
of Sylvia Syms.*

1. RIDIN' ON THE MOON • 6:48 • *Harold Arlen & Johnny Mercer*
2. SKYLARK • 5:41 • *Hoagy Carmichael & Johnny Mercer*
3. I THOUGHT ABOUT YOU • 6:15 • *Jimmy Van Heusen & Johnny Mercer*
4. COME RAIN OR COME SHINE • 4:53 • *Harold Arlen & Johnny Mercer*
5. SATIN DOLL • 9:03 • *Duke Ellington, Billy Strayhorn & Johnny Mercer*
6. EARLY AUTUMN • 6:21 • *Ralph Burns, Woody Herman & Johnny Mercer*
7. HOORAY FOR HOLLYWOOD • 3:42 • *Richard Whiting & Johnny Mercer*
8. FOOLS RUSH IN (Where Angels Fear To Tread) • 6:46 • *Rube Bloom & Johnny Mercer*
9. MEDLEY • 13:32
 - AC-CENT-TCHU-ATE THE POSITIVE • *Harold Arlen & Johnny Mercer*
 - TOO MARVELOUS FOR WORDS • *Richard Whiting & Johnny Mercer*
 - YOU MUST HAVE BEEN A BEAUTIFUL BABY • *Harry Warren & Johnny Mercer*
 - DEARLY BELOVED • *Jerome Kern & Johnny Mercer*
 - GOODY GOODY • *Matt Malneck & Johnny Mercer*
 - I'M AN OLD COWHAND (From The Rio Grande) • *Johnny Mercer*
 - ON THE ATCHISON, TOPEKA AND THE SANTA FE • *Harry Warren & Johnny Mercer*
 - THAT OLD BLACK MAGIC • *Harold Arlen & Johnny Mercer*
 - BLUES IN THE NIGHT (My Mama Done Tol' Me) • *Harold Arlen & Johnny Mercer*
10. MY SHINING HOUR • 5:57 • *Harold Arlen & Johnny Mercer*

Johnny Mercer





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SYLVIA SYMS

A Jazz Portrait of Johnny Mercer



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